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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF INTERIOR DEFENDS GO-SLOW ATTITUDE
TOWARD POLICE TRAINERS FOR AFGHANISTAN

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¶1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with Minister of Interior Annemie Turtelboom on December 16 to discuss possible contributions to police training in Afghanistan. Turtelboom took credit for obtaining cabinet approval for sending two or three police trainers and a magistrate to the EUPOL Afghanistan mission. Turtelboom expressed support for a stronger civilian development commitment to Afghanistan. However, she said she preferred to wait to see how the Belgian public accepts the deployment of the trainers already approved before new ones are authorized. The Ambassador sought Turtelboom's evaluation of where political opposition to sending more police to Afghanistan may arise. She identified certain Flemish Socialist party politicians and the heads of the police unions as obstacles. She also suggested that public opinion on enhanced efforts in Afghanistan generally could be influenced by the editors of the major newspapers in Belgium. The Embassy is looking for ways to more widely publicize the President's Oslo speech upon accepting the Nobel Prize to increase public understanding of the U.S. position on Afghanistan and issues of security generally. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador told Turtelboom that he understands the sensitivities of the GOB about Belgium's engagement in building security and stability in Afghanistan. He said that both the United States and Belgium need to work to clear up misconceptions of the motives for international intervention there. President Obama's Nobel Prize acceptance speech is a clear statement of U.S. intentions regarding peace, he said. A number of Belgian politicians, such as Flemish Socialist Dirk Vandermaelen, are proud to have been pacifists since their student days, he said. The Ambassador has told him that he is a pacifist too, in that the objective is to leave Afghanistan in peace, with the Taliban and Al Qaida defeated, while expending the least amount of military effort to accomplish that end. The strategy, he said, is equally focused on civilian development assistance, and the military surge is intended to allow time for development assistance to be effective and to build a more stable society. He told Turtelboom that the Secretary asked PM Leterme for 150 more troops (a 20% increase) and one more year of a military commitment, through 2011. The Ambassador added that there is also a significant need for police trainers, to train effective Afghan police to support and defend development efforts. What is needed is a sizeable contribution of trainers, beyond the three or four already promised by Belgium, he said.

¶3. (C) Turtelboom said that the idea of sending police trainers to Afghanistan has been on the agenda of her predecessors as Minister of Interior for nearly 2 years. While the other ministers always said no, she said, she decided to go ahead and secure cabinet approval of sending three police officers and a judge. Her view, she said, is

that there are more and more countries in the world where instability and lawlessness exist, such as Somalia. Military troops alone cannot fully stabilize such places. What is needed is capacity building in the armies, police and economies of such countries. Therefore, she said, "I said go." The police grumbled, but the government did not receive any criticism in the press. Turtelboom's hope is to start slowly and then do more, because Belgium should not send only military assistance to Afghanistan. While she understands the Ambassador's approach, Belgium is "more down to earth", she said. Her expectation is that Belgium could send five or ten more police trainers after the first group of three or four has established itself. The trainers are receiving military training to ensure their ability to protect themselves if necessary. It can't all be done at once, she insisted. She admitted that building the capacity of institutions is important, however.

14. (C) The Ambassador inquired about what is holding Belgium back from making a more significant contribution of police trainers. Turtelboom said that her main concern is the security of the trainers. They will receive four weeks of basic military training to ensure their ability to protect themselves if necessary. Turtelboom assumed that "the opposition" will oppose sending more trainers in the future, but added that much depends on public opinion. This is why the Belgian government has started slowly, she said. She expects the first trainers to go to Afghanistan in March or April of 2010. However, Turtelboom said, Defense Minister De Crem's outspoken support of Afghanistan operations is creating a "backlash" against him. If there were a referendum on further participation, she contended, the people would say no. She expects the first trainers to go to Afghanistan in March or April of 2010. The Ambassador said that if there is a public backlash against De Crem, it is not

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especially visible. He suggested a number of ways the Embassy might help build higher public support for the U.S. administration's Afghanistan strategy in Belgium. He pressed Turtelboom about who opposes sending more police trainers to Afghanistan.

15. (C) Turtelboom hesitated, but offered some leads as to where the Embassy could focus its lobbying to change opinion. These include the police unions, led by Jan Schonkeren and Philip Van Hamme. She said that her colleagues Laurette Onkylinx (PS), Minister of Social Affairs, and Joelle Milquet (CdH), Minister of Employment and Equal Opportunity, are convinced and are not obstacles. Former defense minister and Andre Flahaut (PS) is not especially influential in her opinion. In parliament, Flemish Socialist Dirk Vandermaelen is outspoken against what Belgium is doing in Afghanistan. Turtelboom said that to develop public opinion it is important to gain the support of the editors of the major Belgian newspapers.

16. (C) Comment: Turtelboom seems to be most worried about the reaction of the Belgian public to "adventurism" in Afghanistan, but no such reaction is readily apparent in Brussels. Turtelboom's promise of three police trainers and a magistrate will give Belgium a token presence in EUPOL that it does not have now, but one that is large in her mind, as it establishes the principle that Belgium will send police trainers. We understood Turtelboom to say that she will increase the number of trainers if all goes well with the small contingent leaving in a few months. She identifies three major groups as potentially chilling the government's willingness to do more: the opposition parties (mainly Flemish Socialists), the press and public opinion. The Ambassador's contacts so far with the Flemish and francophone socialists indicate that they understand the need for action in Afghanistan, as explained by President Obama. They agree that civilian reconstruction depends on a solid police force. The Ambassador will meet with legislators and newspaper editors. The Embassy also wants to disseminate the

President's Nobel Prize speech more widely, in the belief that its themes will resonate with the Belgian public and is Afghanistan policy's best advocate. Otherwise, few opinion leaders or members of the public will have seen it as delivered by the President. Venues include the Belgian Parliament and possibly the open air Park in Brussels, directly across the street from the Embassy. The upcoming one-year anniversary of President Obama's inauguration will provide a timely opportunity to show the speech. End Comment.

GUTMAN

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